Reagan-Carter battle? God help us: average citizen

Today

Mike Klein's people

In ancient times, long before Jimmy Carter's teeth shone nationally, young braves sought out wise old chiefs to learn their paints, discover the fruits of knowledge, forecast the heavens and otherwise keep themselves informed about modern-day events.

That is no longer necessary. Now, braves merely can ride their ponies into Rolling Meadows, take a couple hard left turns onto Willow Lane and stop outside Richard Johnson's house.

Deep inside that suburban cubicle lives Johnson, who is a steel company employe, the father of four children, owner of two pussycats and a connoisseur of fine wines.

Four years ago, the National Public Affairs Center for Television (N-Pact) decided that Dick Johnson represented the typical American.

N-Pact filmed two television specials with Johnson. For one, they sent him scurrying into Never-Never-Land for a campaign week with Sen. George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate.

Now, we have become embroiled in another election year, and Dick Johnson, Mr. Average American, is being sought out again.

A KNOCK RATTLED his front door the other day. Dick answered in a rush. "I just got through listening to a fiery speech by Hubert Humphrey," Dick said.

"Mercy! He's quite a guy. I thought he'd make a run at the presidency, but he didn't. I voted for him in '68, but I guess it didn't help much."

For nearly two hours, Dick roamed through the 1976 political spectrum, dropping hints and reacting with wonder at the success of Jimmy Carter, whom the Democrats nominated Wednesday evening to carry their presidential banner.

"I'm a Democrat, but still I don't know if I'll vote for Carter," Dick admitted. "What might influence the final vote is who he'll choose for his running mate.

"To be real honest with you," Dick said, "right now I'd probably vote for (President) Ford."

Once before, Dick switched parties and voted for a Republican presidential candidate. That was just four years ago, when a week with McGovern convinced Dick that George was not his man.

DICK ISN'T convinced Carter is his man this time either. He would have preferred other Democrats, especially Minnesota Sen. Humphrey or Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy.

"To be very honest, I am a Kennedy man," he said. "I would have voted for Kennedy the last time."

Like so many other Democrats, Dick waited for Humphrey to do something. Anything. "He could have convinced a lot of people to vote for him," he said. "Maybe he knows something we don't. Maybe his health isn't so good."

It would be "an upset" should Carter win in November, Dick said. He just does not have the experience, even though his charisma has carried Carter to fantastic party support, Dick said.

"Anybody who aspires to be president should have a few years under the belt in Congress," he insisted. "If Carter does get in there, I'll be very surprised."

There is, of course, another political party that will stage its convention next month. It is the Republican, and it is their convention that will supply summertime fireworks this election year.

Here are some people who might not choose to nominate their incumbent president. Rather than lining up behind nice guy Gerald Ford, they might revolt in favor of Ronald Reagan, another who causes voters to wonder about the substance behind the smile.

"Ford and Reagan are so close," Dick said, "that no matter what I said, or you said, we'd both be guessing. If it's Reagan, I know I won't vote for him. I just don't like the man.

"TALK ABOUT Gerald Ford and here's a man that's honest," Dick said. "He stepped into one heckuva dilemma (following Tricky Dick). I don't think people expected wonders from the man.

"The thing that Ford has to do for my vote is get a good vice presidential candidate," he said.

And so it goes for Dick Johnson, who is typically confused, like most Americans. He wondered about a Ford-Reagan ticket, but dismissed that idea.

Dick decided that Ford would not want Reagan on his ticket, nor would Reagan's pride allow him to accept an offer.

Dick kept returning to those vice presidential candidates, who he said could decide the election. How much is Sen. George Mondale, D-Minn., worth to Carter? Certainly less than Kennedy. But more than Edmond Muskie, D-Maine, Illinois' Adali Stevenson, Idaho's Frank Church or others?

And what of the Republican VP candidate? There's been so little discussion of that.

Dick paused to consider a very real possibility in this Bicentennial election year. "If it comes to a battle between Reagan and Carter, Lord help everybody," he said.

DICK JOHNSON

And he followed that with one heavily circulated thought. Dick said, "I don't know why the hell Humphrey didn't get into the act."